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COORDINATION AND INTEGRATION OF INTERNATIONAL STATISTICAL PROGRAMMES

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General is pleased to transmit to the Statistical Commission a report on the implementation of the Review Group proposals on strengthening international statistical cooperation, which is contained in annex I. The report is transmitted to the Commission in accordance with a request by the Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination at its eighteenth session (E/CN.3/1997/19, para. 49 (c)).

* E/CN.3/1997/1.

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Annex I

REPORT ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE REVIEW GROUP PROPOSALS ON STRENGTHENING INTERNATIONAL STATISTICAL COOPERATION

1. At the eighteenth session of the Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination (New York, 16 to 18 April 1996), a small group (comprising Australia, the Netherlands, Brazil, the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)) was requested to review the implementation of the proposals contained in the report by the Review Group on strengthening international statistical cooperation (E/CN.3/AC.1/1992/R.2), known as the Begeer report. The present report, which was prepared by Australia after consultation with the other members of the group, is the outcome.

2. The Begeer report was initially discussed by the Working Group at its fifteenth session (New York, 29 June to 1 July 1992). The Working Group, which agreed with the report's findings, made a number of recommendations to the Statistical Commission and reached a number of decisions on matters arising from the report. At the twenty-seventh session of the Statistical Commission (New York, 22 February to 3 March 1993), the views of the Working Group and the findings of the Begeer report were discussed. The Commission endorsed the outcome of the Working Group discussion, with a few minor changes.' The recommendations of the Begeer report, as contained in its section IV, paragraphs 165-189, are summarized in annex II below, together with the aims of each recommendation as explained in the report, and the results of efforts to implement them.

3. The Begeer report identified the role of the global statistical system as twofold: first, to serve and support the activities of international institutions; second, to provide the world at large with statistical information for discussion, assessment and analysis at the world and regional levels. The report recognized the complexity of the international statistical system and acknowledged that the necessary coordinating bodies are in place but recommended that existing machinery be made more effective for the benefit of the system as a whole.

4. The Begeer report recognized that there are many key players in the international statistical system, including a number of specialized bodies within the United Nations system, the Statistics Divisions of the United Nations Secretariat and the regional commissions, and two important regional institutions that are not part of the United Nations system: the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the European Community (EC). Since the international statistical system has its foundations in the statistical systems of member States, the national statistical agencies are themselves key stakeholders, as are users of statistics.

5. The Begeer report assumed that the existing international statistical system, which is decentralized in both the subject and regional dimensions, would continue unchanged, an assumption that is critical to its recommendations. To function well the report recommended that the system needs, first,

coordination in order to achieve and maintain coherence, credibility and usefulness, and to avoid the duplication of work and waste of resources; and second, the concrete involvement of member States.

6. As indicated in annex II, the Statistical Commission has accepted most of the Review Group's recommendations. However, as also indicated in annex II, implementation of the recommendations has been uneven, particularly for some of the significant and important ones. The Commission may wish to consider whether any of the recommendations need to be pursued further.

7. As to the recommendations on the organization of coordination, which were accorded the highest priority in the report, some significant progress has been made. The ACC Subcommittee on Statistical Activities seems to be more focused on its role as a key coordinating body and is performing effectively, although the task forces set up under its auspices - with the notable exception of the Task Force on International Trade Statistics - have not been very active. In addition, under the auspices of the Statistical Commission a number of working groups on critical problems have been established in which, following the Voorburg Group model, countries are the leaders. The Expert Group on Critical Problems in Economic Statistics has identified the remaining gaps in the international work programme, as a result of which additional task forces have been established. It would be useful to extend that type of analysis to social statistics, and to ensure that similar exercises are undertaken every four or five years.

8. As to the involvement of member States in the international statistical system, a key issue, the Begeer report suggested that it should be possible for all member States to participate in the development of the global statistical system. In view of the geographically decentralized nature of the international statistical system, the report considered that the best approach was to strengthen and more clearly focus the work of the regional statistics divisions and conferences of chief statisticians, in which all countries can participate and exchange their experience. The results of the work of the regional statistics divisions and conferences of chief statisticians should be fed into the Statistical Commission, since in the opinion of the Review Group the Commission itself is not an appropriate forum for carrying out such work because its members do not represent their individual backgrounds but rather the world statistical system. Little progress has been made in implementing those important recommendations, although it is accepted that the Conference of European Statisticians contributes significantly to the Commission's discussions.

9. As to the decentralized nature of the international statistical system in terms of subject, member States should be able to take a holistic view across all subject areas of the international statistical system, which at the moment is not possible because there are no mechanisms or processes in place for doing so; the Commission itself does not have a broad enough reach and the individual components of the international statistical system are quite heterogeneous.

10. To amplify that point, three quite different examples are worth considering. First, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) recently promulgated a number of standards for the dissemination of statistics. Although those

standards were discussed with some statistical bodies, they were mainly negotiated through countries' central banks and finance departments since those are the country agencies that are most directly involved with IMF activities - a proper and appropriate way of doing things from the IMF point of view. However, from the point of view of the international statistical system it seems peculiar to say the least that the government statisticians of the world, as a group, did not have a direct input into the process, nor was it perceived by IMF that such an input would be appropriate. The Statistical Commission may wish to comment on whether or not that is an appropriate way of developing international statistical policy, particularly when such policy has implications far beyond the area that is sponsoring it. The question is especially relevant since the International Labour Office is on the point of developing standards for the release of labour statistics.

11. Second, standards are currently being developed on education statistics that will be considered and ratified under the banner of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). What role, in a collective sense, do government statisticians have in that process? Again, where does the Statistical Commission fit in, if at all? In asking those generic questions, it is appreciated that the Conference of European Statisticians does work closely with UNESCO.

12. Third, what is happening internationally in the important fields of crime and drug abuse statistics? Are government statisticians or the Statistical Commission involved? Much thinking needs to be done by member States about the international coordination that is needed across the various subject fields, and what they need to do to achieve it. To date, very little progress, if any, has been made on that front.

13. There is still a very strong requirement and challenge for the international statistical system to be managed in a way that allows and is seen to allow all stakeholders, particularly member States, to contribute, and that ensures that the statistical issues under consideration are relevant across the varying requirements of the member States. In addition, the view has been expressed that a small number of countries are dominating international statistical forums; whether or not that view is justified, it must be accepted that it exists. In conclusion, it remains the responsibility of the Statistical Commission to plan and implement action to further improve the organization or coordination as envisaged in the Begeer report.

Notes

* See Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1993, Supplement No. 6 (E/1993/26).

Annex II

Summary of recommendations of the Review Group, aim and results

Recommendation	Aim	Result
A. Organisation of coordination (highest priority) I. Statistical Commission (a) Commission to request the Economic and Social Council to change the cycle of Commission sessions to annual meetings of eight half-days, spread over five calendar days (para 110).	To strengthen the involvement of members in the work of the Commission by having shorter more frequent meetings.	The fifteenth session of the Working Group 1/ accepted this recommendation, adding the rider that it should be on the basis of needs. The twenty-seventh session of the Statistical Commission 2/ broadly accepted that it should meet more frequently, if necessary. (There was a special Statistical Commission session in 1994, followed by a regular Statistical Commission session in 1995.

Recommendation	Aim	Result
(b) Commission to nominate members for the Bureau for next session at the end of a session; formal election at the beginning of a session.	As continuity in members of the Commission is not high, namely elected members of the Bureau (Chair, vice-chair, rapporteur) are normally not familiar with what is going on, and often not prepared for their roles.	The fifteenth session of the Working Group 1/ accepted this recommendation. The twenty-seventh session of the Statistical Commission 2/ decided that this would take place with immediate effect.
Re-elect same persons a number of times to the Bureau.	To improve continuity.	The fifteenth session of the Working Group 1/ accepted this recommendation. The twenty-seventh session of the Statistical Commission 2/ decided that this would take place with immediate effect.
Bureau can meet informally (paras 111-113).	To improve effectiveness.	The fifteenth session of the Working Group 1/ accepted this recommendation. The twenty-seventh session of the Statistical Commission 2/ decided that this would take place with immediate effect.

Recommendation	Aim	Result
(c) The Statistics Division to give a copy of the "Rules of procedure of the functional commissions of the Economic and Social Council" to new members of the Bureau. Consider drafting a popular version of the "Rules" extended with practical hints (para 109).	To improve effectiveness.	The fifteenth session of the Working Group 1/ accepted this recommendation. The twenty-seventh session of the Statistical Commission 2/ decided that this would take place with immediate effect.
(d) The Statistics Division to invite chairpersons of regional conferences of chief statistician to participate in the sessions (para 109).	Members of the Commission are not present because of their individual background, but as representatives of the world statistical community. For this reason chairpersons of the regional conferences of chief statisticians should participate in order for the views of countries to be heard effectively.	The fifteenth session of the Working Group 1/ accepted this recommendation. The twenty-seventh session of the Statistical Commission 2/ decided that this would take place with immediate effect. The recommendation appears to have been affected, although it was essentially only about formalising an existing informal arrangement.

Recommendation	Aim	Result
(e) Agencies to present their informational statements on paper not through lengthy oral statements. Specific items to be well prepared and well documented through ACC Subcommittee and/or the Working Group (paras 109-118).	No need for the Commission to listen to lengthy oral reports.	The fifteenth session of the Working Group 1/ accepted this recommendation. The twenty-seventh session of the Statistical Commission 2/ decided that this would take place with immediate effect. Recommendation appears to be "honoured in the breach"!
II. The Working Group (a) The Group to hold biannual meetings of two days (para 115).	The Working Group is looked upon as the executive committee of the Commission, and therefore should meet at least once between each Commission meeting.	The fifteenth session of the Working Group 1/ accepted this recommendation. The twenty-seventh session of the Statistical Commission 2/ decided to make the recommendation to the Economic and Social Council that the Working Group meet once a year. (The Working Group subsequently met in 1993, 1994, 1996 and the next scheduled meeting is 1998.
(b) Commission to indicate members for the Working Group at the end of a session of the Commission; and to give preference to newly nominated members of the bureau for the next session (para 114).	To improve continuity.	The fifteenth session of the Working Group 1/ accepted this recommendation The twenty-seventh session of the Statistical Commission 2/ decided that this would take place with immediate effect.

Recommendation	Aim	Result
(c) The Statistics Division to invite chairpersons of regional conferences of chief statisticians to participate in the meetings (para. 117).	Members of the Working Group are not present because of their individual backgrounds, but as representatives of the world statistical community. For this reason, chairpersons of the regional conferences should participate in order for the views of countries to be heard effectively.	The fifteenth session of the Working Group 1/ accepted this recommendation. The twenty-seventh session of the Statistical Commission 2/ decided that this would take place with immediate effect.
(d) The Statistics Division to prepare short reports of meetings. Results of meetings mainly to be specific documentation for the Commission (para 116).	The outputs of the Working Group should be reports/ advice for the Commission. Therefore, there is no need for lengthy reports.	The fifteenth session of the Working Group 1/ accepted this recommendation. The twenty-seventh session of the Statistical Commission 2/ decided that this would take place with immediate effect.
III. ACC Subcommittee on Statistical Activities (a) The Statistics Division and agencies to place more emphasis on coordination aspects (paras 90-91);	To see the Statistics Division picks up its coordinating functions which were ascribed to it in the nuclear session in 1946.	The fifteenth session of the Working Group 1/ accepted this recommendation. The twenty-seventh session of the Statistical Commission 2/ decided that this would take place with immediate effect.

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Recommendation	Aim	Result
(b) ACC Subcommittee to form ad hoc groups for special topics (paras 89 and 118);	The report suggested the ACC could contribute more on the coordination front, and suggested this would be aided if the ACC reported on specific and general topics to the Working Group and the Statistical Commission.	While the Working Group 1/ accepted this recommendation, it considered that the recommendation had been substantially met through the task force mechanism. Two task forces (national accounts and international trade statistics) had been created prior to the fifteenth session of the Working Group, and the fifteenth session created a further four (industrial and construction statistics, finance statistics, price statistics including ICP, and environment statistics). The twenty-seventh session of the Statistical Commission 2/ decided that Working Group recommendation would take place with immediate effect. Subsequently, other task forces have been created.
(c) No lengthy report of the meetings for Commission: specific documentation for Commission through the Working Group (para 118).	To ensure that key issues discussed are easily identifiable.	The fifteenth session of the Working Group 1/ accepted this recommendation. The twenty-seventh session of the Statistical Commission 2/ decided that this would take place with immediate effect. This appears to be working in practice, although reading the reports is still a tedious exercise!

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Recommendation	Aim	Result
IV. Statistics Division of the United Nations Secretariat (a) To strengthen the role of serving the purposes and work of the Commission (para 119);	To have the Statistics Division better serve the work of the Commission.	The fifteenth session of the Working Group 1/ changed this recommendation somewhat, by adding the words "to find ways" to the beginning of the recommendation. It also decided to request the Statistics Division to present options to the twenty-seventh session of the Statistical Commission on ways this could be achieved. The twenty-seventh session of the Statistical Commission 2/ decided that the Working Group recommendation would take place with immediate effect.
(b) To place more emphasis on coordination aspects: (para. 119).	To have the Statistics Division better serve the international statistical system.	Same as above.

Recommendation	Aim	Result
V. Strengthening the role of regional statistics divisions and conferences of chief statisticians (a) Commission to advise regional commissions through the Economic and Social Council to strengthen statistics divisions; Commission to advise regional commissions through the Council to promote the establishment of conferences of chief statisticians in those cases where they do not already exist (paras 92, 107-108, 120).	To attain a more equal level of performance. To correct imbalances in the strength of national statistical systems. To identify structural solutions to make it possible that all member states can participate in the development of a better global system, and to improve coordination.	The fifteenth session of the Working Group 1/ established a drafting group to prepare recommendations concerning the role of the regional statistical conferences and statistical divisions, to be put forward to the twenty-seventh session of the Statistical Commission. This does not appear to have occurred. The issue "strengthening the role of regional commissions in statistics" was discussed at the Working Group (17th session), where it was decided that a paper would be prepared for the next Working Group session. A background report was subsequently prepared by ECE, ESCAP and ESCWA. The Working Group (18th session) agreed that the report be updated to take account of comments from the Working Group for consideration at the twenty-ninth session of the Statistical Commission.

Recommendation	Aim	Result
(b) Statistical Commission to request agencies working at world level to cooperate to the fullest extent with regional statistics divisions and conferences of chief statisticians on statistics, standards and technical assistance (para 132-137);	To achieve better coordination and cooperation in the international statistical system.	Same as above.
(c) Regional Conferences of chief statisticians should be more involved in the development/ revisions of standards and in technical assistance projects. Statistics divisions should be involved in pilot studies to test draft standards and in drafting adapted handbooks. Statistics divisions should be involved in monitoring the adherence to adopted standards.	To ensure close cooperation, division of labour, sharing of work and avoidance competition, as well as an optimal use of resources.	The fifteenth session of the Working Group 1/ established a drafting group to prepare recommendations concerning the role of the regional statistical conferences and statistical divisions, to be put forward to the twenty-seventh session of the Statistical Commission.

Recommendation	Aim	Result
VI. Substantive aspects of coordination Integrated work programmes and improved documentation (high priority) (a) The Statistics Division in cooperation with international agencies to develop a (hierarchical) classification of statistical subjects as a basis for programmes and coordination (paras 51-55);	To enable programmes of work of different agencies to be described in a common framework which will allow the identification of gaps and overlaps.	The fifteenth session of the Working Group 1/ requested that the Statistics Division and ACC Subcommittee on Statistical Activities present inter-agency planning reports on a subject basis where feasible at the twenty-seventh session of the Statistical Commission. (The "on a subject basis" of the decision loses the "integrated" thrust of the Begeer recommendations.) No such reports appear to have been presented, although reports on the overall review of statistical work of international organisations and the work of the UNSD were presented. The Statistical Commission requested some improvements, and that similar reports be prepared for the twenty-eighth session of the Statistical Commission. There were a number of plans and work programs presented to the twenty-eighth session, and the plans were endorsed by the Statistical Commission.

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Recommendation	Aim	Result
(b) On the basis of the classification the Commission to oversee the development of: (i) A (descriptive) integrated programme on data collection, data processing and dissemination of statistics; (ii) A (descriptive) integrated programme on construction/revision of standards; (iii) A (descriptive) integrated programme on technical assistance (The three programmes should be related and pay attention to the available resources). (paras 149 and 150)	To clearly describe the distribution of activities among agencies and to establish cooperation agreements between them.	The Working Group also decided that there were six areas where the need for review was considered a high priority. These areas were covered either by existing task forces (national accounts and international trade statistics) or would be covered by four new task forces established by the Working Group (Industrial and Construction statistics, finance statistics, price statistics including ICP, and environment statistics). The twenty-seventh session of the Statistical Commission 2/ strongly endorsed this decision. Other task forces have been subsequently established.
(c) The Statistics Division to update and improve the documentation on the global statistical system, so that this documentation is related to the above-mentioned programmes (para 155 and 156).	Continual updating of documentation is instrumental for an integrated statistical program strongly endorsed this decision.	

Recommendation	Aim	Result
B. Standards (high priority) (a) Set up a system for monitoring the adherence to adopted United Nations classifications, including a description of the present situation on the adoption of classifications in the member countries and their relationship with adopted United Nations classifications (para 129);	To identify situations where standards have been set wrongly, or where countries need technical assistance.	The Working Group essentially accepted this recommendation, adding that a progress report should be provided to the Statistical Commission at its twenty-eighth session. The twenty-seventh session of the Statistical Commission 2/ endorsed this recommendation, charging the UNSD with responsibility for the work, but no such report was presented to the twenty-eighth session.
(b) A discussion paper is required on the advantages and disadvantages of more flexible standards (classifications, etc.). Concentrate in first instance on classifications for economic activities and commodities (ISIC, Rev 3 and NACE.1,etc)(para 74-79, 122-131);	By overcoming the problems of fixed standards, achieve greater compatibility of statistics, where each country can adopt a version of a standard that fits into the commonly developed system.	The fifteenth session of the Working Group 1/ recommended that such a discussion paper should be presented to the twenty-eighth session of the Statistical Commission. The twenty-seventh session of the Statistical Commission 2/ requested that the Working Group consider it as a possible special topic for the twenty-eighth session. An Expert Group on International Classifications was subsequently established, which reported to the twenty-eighth session of the Statistical Commission; however, its report appears to have concentrated on coordination of work on classifications, rather than the issue of possible flexibility in classifications.

Recommendation	Aim	Result
(c) Continued efforts to reduce duplication in collecting and processing data from member countries (see "Inventory"). (paras 102, 132-137) The Commission may request the Statistics Division and the ACC Subcommittee to give this continual attention. Progress report at each session of the Commission along the lines of chapter 1 of the "Inventory".	To reduce duplication in collecting and processing data.	The fifteenth session of the Working Group 1/ recommended that the Statistical Commission should request the Statistics Division and the ACC Subcommittee to give continual attention to this issue, and request a progress report to each session of the Commission. The twenty-seventh session of the Statistical Commission 2/ endorsed this recommendation, adding that the report be organised along subject matter lines. No report was provided to the twenty-eighth session of the Statistical Commission, which requested that report be provided to the 18th session of the Working Group. This was done, essentially in the form of a list of collections, without comment.
(d) On the basis of the classification of statistical subjects develop a programme for auditing statistics, disseminated in whatever form by the Statistics Division, the statistics divisions and the other agencies in the United Nations system (paras 138-148).	Through analysing and evaluating statistics disseminated by international agencies, enforce better coordination in dissemination and enhance confidence in the performance of the international statistical system.	The fifteenth session of the Working Group 1/ requested that the task forces investigate ways to carry out evaluations and carry them out as far as possible. This loses the "holistic" and "coordinated" nature of the Begeer recommendation. This decision was endorsed by the twenty-seventh session of the Statistical Commission 2/

Recommendation	Aim	Result
C. <u>A review of publications (high priority)</u> (a) Consider the review undertaken by the Conference of European Statisticians. Set up a similar review. This item primarily concerns the publications in printed or similar form, but the relationship with machine readable forms of dissemination should be taken into accounts (para 157).	To ensure that only useful publications are produced.	The fifteenth session of the Working Group 1/ requested the task forces to address this issue in the course of their review of particular subject areas. This decision was endorsed by the twenty-seventh session of the Statistical Commission.2/

Recommendation	Aim	Result
D. <u>An inventory of gaps and weaknesses in the international statistical system (high priority)</u> (a) On the basis of the (descriptive) integrated work programme of statistics and related documentation an effort should be made to identify weaknesses, gaps and imbalances in the current programme. In such a process budgetary aspects should be taken into account (paras 158-163);	To identify gaps, weaknesses and imbalances in international statistics.	The fifteenth session of the Working Group 1/ requested the various task forces carry out this task in their particular subject areas. This loses the "holistic" nature of the Begeer recommendations, but to a certain extent this was picked up by the later-established expert group on critical problems in economic statistics.
(b) Besides the continuation of efforts to reduce the time lag between the observation period and the moment of dissemination of structural and detailed statistics, for some statistical subjects consider the possibility of collecting and disseminating more recent statistical information (main indicators) (para 164).	To respond to needs for (preliminary) recent data for short-term provisional indicators on recent developments.	The fifteenth session of the Working Group 1/ requested the various task forces carry out this task in their particular subject areas.

Recommendation	Aim	Result
E. <u>Authoritative advice of the Statistical Commission</u> The role of the Statistical Commission is mainly an advisory one. However, this role should be strengthened in the interest of the global statistical system. In this report the potential role of the Commission is emphasised. On the basis of the proposals made earlier in this report this role should be used to: (a) Give authoritative advice on the allocation of statistical subjects to the agencies. This allocation concerns statistical work, development/revision of standards and technical assistance; (b) And on the detailed agreements between the agencies on cooperation regarding the actual	To use the professional influence of the Statistical Commission to achieve more cooperation/coordination between international agencies.	This recommendation was accepted by the Working Group 1/, and the twenty-seventh session of the Statistical Commission 2/ subsequently decided that its role should include these activities.

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Notes

[1] Report of the Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination on its fifteenth session (E/CN.3/1993/21).

[2] Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1993, Supplement No. 6 (E/1993/26).